The Turmoil

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

The Story of a Big Man in a Big Town

SYNOPSIS.

—10—

Sheridan's attempt to make a business man of his son Bibbs by starting him in the machine shop ends in Bibbs going to a sanitarium, a nervous wreck. On his return Bibbs finds himself an inconsiderable and unconsidered figure in the "New House" of the Sheridans. The Vertreeses, old-town family next door and impoverished, call on the Sheridans, newly-rich, and Mary afterward puts into words her parents' unspoken wish that she marry one of the Sheridan boys. Mary frankly encourages Jim Sheridan's attentions. Jim tells Mary Bibbs is not a lunatic—"just queer." He proposes to Mary, who half accepts him. Sheridan tells Bibbs he must go back to the machine shop as soon as he is strong enough, in spite of Bibbs' plea to be allowed to write. Edith, Bibbs' sister, and Sibyl, Roscoe Sheridan's wife, quarrel over Bobby Lamhorn; Sibyl goes to Mary for help to keep Lamhorn from marrying Edith, and Mary leaves her in the room alone. Bibbs has to break to his father the news of Jim's sudden death. All the rest of the family helpless in their grief, Bibbs becomes temporary master of the house. At the funeral he meets Mary and rides home with her. Bibbs purposely interrupts a tete-a-tete between Edith and Lamhorn. He tells Edith that he overheard Lamhorn making love to Roscoe's wife. Doctor Gurney finds Bibbs well enough to go back to the machine shop. Mary and Bibbs meet by accident and form a pleasant friendship. Roscoe Sheridan and his wife quarrel desperately about Bobby Lamhorn. Bibbs decides to go to work.

One of the greatest boons of friendship is that it means understanding. Each of us has in his soul fancies, dreams, reveries, which only one other person, perhaps, can appreciate. Very often we must go beyond the lines of family ties to find the beautiful sympathy of friendship.

CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

"How often is that?"

"The thing should make about sixty-eight disks a minute—a little more than one a second."

"And you're close to it?"

"Oh, the workman has to sit in its lap," he said, turning to her more gayly. "The others don't mind. You see, it's something wrong with me. I have an idiotic way of flinching from the confounded thing—I flinch and duck a little every time the crash comes, and I couldn't get over it. I was a treat to the other workmen in that room; they'll be glad to see me back. They used to laugh at me all day long."

Mary's gaze was averted from Bibbs now: she sat with her elbow resting on the arm of the chair, her lifted hand pressed against her cheek. She was staring at the wall, and her eyes had a burning brightness in them.

"It doesn't seem possible anyone could do that to you," she said, in a low voice. "No. He's not kind. He ought to be proud to help you to the leisure to write books; it should be his greatest privilege to have them published for you—"

"Can't you see him?" Bibbs interrupted, a faint ripple of hilarity in his voice. "No. It's just as well he never got the— But what's the use? I've never written anything worth printing, and I never shall."

"You could!" she said.

"That's because you've never seen the poor little things I've tried to do."

"You wouldn't let me, but I know you could! Ah, it's a pity!"

"It isn't," said Bibbs, honestly. "I never could—but you're the kindest lady in this world, Miss Vertrees."

She gave him a flashing glance, and it was as kind as he said she was. "That sounds wrong," she said, impulsively. "I mean 'Miss Vertrees.' I've thought of you by your first name ever since I met you. Wouldn't you rather call me 'Mary'?"

Bibbs was dazzled; he drew a long, deep breath and did not speak.

"Wouldn't you?" she asked, without a trace of coquetry.

"If I can!" he said, in a low voice.

"Ah, that's very pretty!" she laughed. "You're such an honest person, it's pleasant to have you gallant sometimes, by way of variety." She became grave again immediately. "I hear myself laughing as if it were someone else. It sounds like laughter on the eve of a great calamity." She got up restlessly, crossed the room and leaned against the wall, facing him. "You've got to go back to that place?"

He nodded.

"And the other time you did it—"

"Just over it," said Bibbs. "Two years. But I don't mind the prospect of a repetition so much as—"

"So much as what?" she prompted, as he stopped.

Bibbs looked up at her shyly. "I want to say it, but—but I come to a dead balk when I try. I—"

"Go on. Say it, whatever it is," she bade him. "You wouldn't know how to say anything I shouldn't like."

"I doubt if you'd either like or dislike what I want to say," he returned, moving uncomfortably in his chair and looking at his feet—he seemed to feel awkward, thoroughly. "You see, all my life—until I met you—if I ever felt like saying anything, I wrote it instead. Saying things is a new trick for me, and this—well, it's just this: I used to feel as if I hadn't ever had any sort of a life at all. I'd never been of use to anything or anybody, and I'd never had anything, myself, except a kind of haphazard thinking. But now it's different—I'm still of no use to anybody, and I don't see any prospect of being useful, but I have had something for myself. I've had a beautiful and happy experience, and it makes my life seem to be—I mean I'm glad I've lived it! That's all; it's your letting me be near you sometimes, as you have, this strange, beautiful, happy little while!"

He did not once look up, and reached silence, at the end of what he had to say, with eyes still awkwardly regarding his feet. She did not speak, but a soft rustling of her garments let him know that she had gone back to her chair again. The house was still; the shabby old room was so quiet that the sound of a creaking in the wall seemed sharp and loud.

And yet, when Mary spoke at last, her voice was barely audible. "If you think it has been—happy—to be friends with me—you'd want to—to make it last."

"Yes," he gulped.

"But you make that kind of speech to me because you think it's over."

He tried to evade her. "Oh, a day laborer can't come in his overalls—"

"No," she interrupted, with a sudden sharpness. "You said what you did because you think the shop's going to kill you."

"No, no!"

"Yes, you do think that!" She rose to her feet again and came and stood before him. "Don't deny it, Bibbs. Well, if you meant what you said—and you did mean it, I know it!—you're not going to go back to the sanitarium. The shop shan't hurt you. It shan't!"

And now Bibbs looked up. She stood before him, straight and tall, splendid in generous strength, her eyes shining and wet.

"If I mean that much to you," she cried, "they can't harm you! Go back to the shop—but come to me when your day's work is done. Let the machines crash their sixty-eight times a minute, but remember each crash that deafens you is that much nearer the evening and me!"

He stumbled to his feet. "You say—" he gasped.

"Every evening, dear Bibbs!"

He could only stare, bewildered.

"Every evening. I want you. They sha'n't hurt you again!" And she held out her hand to him; it was strong and warm in his tremulous clasp. "If I could, I'd go and feed the strips of zinc to the machine with you," she said. "But all day long I'll send my thoughts to you. You must keep remembering that your friend stands beside you. And when the work is done—won't the night make up for the day?"

Light seemed to glow from her; he was blinded by that radiance of kindness. But all he could say was, huskily, "To think you're there—with me—standing beside the old zinc-eater—"

And they laughed and looked at each other, and at last Bibbs found what it meant not to be alone in the world. He had a friend.

CHAPTER XIX.

When he came into the new house, a few minutes later, he found his father sitting alone by the library fire. Bibbs went in and stood before him.

"I'm cured, father," he said. "When do I go back to the shop? I'm ready."

The desolate and grim old man did

"I'm Cured, Father," He Said.

not relax. "I was sittin' up to give you a last chance to say something like that. I reckon it's about time! I just wanted to see if you'd have manhood enough not to make me take you over there by the collar. Last night I made up my mind I'd give you just one more day. Well, you got to it before I did—pretty close to the eleventh hour! All right. Start in tomorrow. It's the first o' the month Think you can get up in time?"

"Six o'clock," Bibbs responded briskly. "And I want to tell you—I'm going in a 'cheerful spirit.' As you said I'll go and I'll 'like it!'"

"That's your lookout!" his father grunted. "They'll put you back on the clippin' machine. You get nine dollars a week."

"More than I'm worth, too," said Bibbs, cheerily. "That reminds me, I didn't mean you by 'Midas' in that nonsense I'd been writing. I meant—"

"Makes a hell of a lot of difference what you mean!"

"I just wanted you to know. Good night, father."

"G'night!"

The sound of the young man's footsteps ascending the stairs became inaudible, and the house was quiet. But presently, as Sheridan sat staring angrily at the fire, the shuffling of a pair of slippers could be heard descending, and Mrs. Sheridan made her appearance, her oblique expression and the state of her toilette being those of a person who, after trying unsuccessfully to sleep on one side, has got up to look for burglars.

"Papa?" she exclaimed, drowsily. "Why'n't you go to bed? It must be goin' on 'leven o'clock!"

She yawned, and seated herself near him, stretching out her hands to the fire. "What's the matter?" she asked, sleep and anxiety striving sluggishly with each other in her voice. "I knew you were worried all dinner time. You got something new on your mind besides Jim's bein' taken away like he was. What's worryin' you now, papa?"

"Nothin'."

She jeered feebly. "N' tell me that! You sat up to see Bibbs, didn't you?"

"He starts in at the shop again to-morrow morning," said Sheridan.

"Just the same as he did before?"

"Just pre-cisely!"

"How—long you goin' to keep him at it, papa?" she asked, timidly.

"Until he knows something!" The unhappy man struck his palms together, then got to his feet and began to pace the room, as was his wont when he talked. "He'll go back to the machine he couldn't learn to tend properly in the six months he was there, and he'll stick to it till he does learn it! That boy's whole life, there's been a settin' up o' something mulish that's against everything I want him to do. I don't know what it is, but it's got to be worked out of him. Now, labor ain't any more a simple question than what it was when we were young. My idea is that, outside o' union troubles, the man that can manage workin' men is the man that's been one himself. Well, I set Bibbs to learn the men and to learn the business, and he set himself to balk on the first job! That's what he did, and the balk's lasted close on to three years. If he balks again I'm just done with him! Sometimes I feel like I was pretty near done with everything, anyhow!"

"I knew there was something else," said Mrs. Sheridan, blinking over a yawn. "You better let it go till tomorrow and get to bed now—'less you'll tell me?"

"Suppose something happened to Roscoe," he said. "Then what'd I have to look forward to? Then what could I depend on to hold things together? A lummix! A lummix that hasn't learned how to push a strip o' zinc along a groove!"

"Roscoe?" she yawned. "You needn't worry about Roscoe, papa. He's the strongest child we had. I never did know anybody keep better health than he does. I don't believe he's even had a cold in five years. You better go up to bed, papa."

"Suppose something did happen to him, though. You don't know what it means, keepin' property together these days—just keepin' it alive, let alone makin' it grow the way I do. I tell you when a man dies, if that dead man's chuldern ain't on the job, night and day, everything he built 'll get carried off. My Lord! when I think o' such things comin' to me! It don't seem like I deserved it—no man ever tried harder to raise his boys right than I have. I planned and planned and planned how to bring 'em up to be guards to drive the wolves off, and how to be builders to build, and build bigger. I tell you this business life is no fool's job nowadays—a man's got to have eyes in the back of his head. You hear talk, sometimes, 'd make you think the millennium had come—but right the next breath you'll hear somebody hollerin' about 'the great unrest.' You bet there's a 'great unrest!' There ain't any man alive smart enough to see what it's goin' to do to us in the end, nor what day it's got set to bust loose, but it's frothin' and bubblin' in the boiler. This country's been fillin' up with it from all over the world for a good many years, and the old camp-meetin' days are dead and done with. Church ain't what it used to be. Nothin's what it used to be—everything's turned up from the bottom, and the growth is so big the roots stick out in the air. There's an awful ruction goin' on, and you got to keep hoppin' if you're goin' to keep your balance on the top of it. And the schemers! They run like bugs on the bottom of a board—after any piece o' money they hear is loose. Fool schemes and crooked schemes; the fool ones are the worst and the worst! You got to fight to keep your money after you've made it. And the woods are full o' mighty industrious men that's only got one motto: 'Get the other fellow's money

"I'm Not Drinking Because I've Got a Thirst."

before he gets yours!' And when a mans' built as I have, when he's built good and strong, and made good things grow and prosper—those are the fellows that lay for a chance to slide in and sneak the benefit of it and put their names to it! And what's the use my havin' ever been born, if such a thing as that is goin' to happen? What's the use my havin' worked my life and soul into my business, if it's all goin' to be dispersed and scattered soon as I'm in the ground?"

He strode up and down the long room, gesticulating—little regarding the troubled and drowsy figure by the fireside. His throat rumbled thunderously; the words came with stormy bitterness. "You think this is a time for young men to be lyin' on beds of ease? I tell you there never was such a time before; there never was such opportunity. The sluggard is despoiled while he sleeps—yes, by George! If a man lays down they'll eat him before he wakes!—but the live man can build straight up till he touches the sky! This is the business man's day; it used to be the soldier's day and the statesman's day, but this is ours! And it ain't a Sunday to go fishin'—it's turmoil! turmoil!—and you got to go out and live it and breathe it and make it yourself, or you'll only be a dead man walkin' around dreamin' you're alive. And that's what my son Bibbs has been doin' all his life, and what he'd rather do now than go out and do his part by me. And if anything happens to Roscoe—"

"Oh, do stop worryin' over such nonsense," Mrs. Sheridan interrupted, irritated into sharp wakefulness for the moment. "There ain't anything goin' to happen to Roscoe, and you're just tormentin' yourself about nothin'. Aren't you ever goin' to bed?"

Sheridan halted. "All right, mamma," he said, with a vast sigh. "Let's go up." And he snapped off the electric light, leaving only the rosy glow of the fire.

"Did you speak to Roscoe?" she yawned, rising lopsidedly in her drowsiness. "Did you mention about what I told you the other evening?"

"No. I will tomorrow."

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But Roscoe did not come downtown the next day, nor the next; nor did Sheridan see fit to enter his son's house. He waited. Then, on the fourth day of the month, Roscoe walked into his father's office at nine in the morning, when Sheridan happened to be alone.

"They told me downstairs you'd left word you wanted to see me."

"Sit down," said Sheridan, rising.

Roscoe sat. His father walked close to him, sniffed suspiciously, and then walked away, smiling bitterly. "Boh!" he exclaimed. "Still at it!"

"Yes," said Roscoe. "I've had a couple of drinks this morning. What about it?"

"I reckon I better adopt some decent young man," his father returned. "I'd bring Bibbs up here and put him in your place if he was fit. I would!"

"Better do it," Roscoe assented, sullenly.

"When'd you begin this thing?"

"I always did drink a little. Ever since I grew up, that is."

"Leave that talk out! You know what I mean."

"Well, I don't know as I ever had too much in office hours—until the other day."

Sheridan began cutting. "It's a lie. I've had Ray Wills up from your office. He didn't want to give you away, but I put the books into him, and he came through. You were drunk twice before and couldn't work. You been leavin' your office for drinks every few hours for the last three weeks. I been over your books. Your office is way behind. You haven't done any work, to count, in a month."

Roscoe's head was sunk between his shoulders. "I can't stand very much talk about it, father," he said, pleadingly.

"No!" Sheridan cried. "Neither can I! What do you think it means to me?" He dropped into the chair at his big desk, groaning. "I can't stand to talk about it any more'n you can to listen, but I'm goin' to find out what's the matter with you, and I'm goin' to straighten you out!"

Roscoe shook his head helplessly.

"You can't straighten me out."

"See here!" said Sheridan. "Can you go back to your office and stay sober today, while I get my work done, or wfll I have to hire a couple o' huskies to follow you around and knock the whisky out o' your hand if they see you tryin' to take it?"

"You needn't worry about that," said Roscoe, looking up with a faint resentment. "I'm not drinking because I've got a thirst."

"Well, what have you got?"

"Nothing. Nothing you can do anything about. Nothing, I tell you."

"We'll see about that!" said Sheridan, harshly. "Now I can't fool with you today, and you get up out o' that chair and get out o' my office. You bring your wife to dinner tomorrow. You didn't come last Sunday—but you come tomorrow. I'll talk this out with you when the women-folks are workin' the phonograph, after dinner. Can you keep sober till then? You better be sure, because I'm goin' to send Abercrombie down to your office every little while, and he'll let me know."

Roscoe paused at the door. "You told Abercrombie about it?" he asked.

"Told him!" And Sheridan laughed hideously. "Do you suppose there's an elevator boy in the whole dam' building that ain't on to you?"

Roscoe settled his hat down over his eyes and went out.

CHAPTER XX.

Who looks a mustang in the eye?
Changety, chang, chang! Bash! Crash! Bang!

So sang Bibbs, his musical gayeties inaudible to his fellow workmen because of the noise of the machinery. He had discovered long ago that the uproar was rhythmical, and it had been intolerable; but now, on the afternoon of the fourth day of his return, he was accompanying the swing and clash of the metals with jubilant vaquero fragments, mingling improvisations of his own among them, and mocking the zinc eater's crash with vocal imitations:

Fearless and bold,
Chang! Bash! Behold!
With a leap from the ground
To the saddle in a bound,
And away—and away!
Hi-yay!

The long room was ceaselessly thundering with metallic sound; the air was thick with the smell of oil; the floor trembled perpetually; everything was implacably in motion—nowhere was there a rest for the dizzied eye. The first time he had entered the place Bibbs had become dizzy instantly, and six months of it had only added increasing nausea to faintness. But he felt neither now. "All day long I'll send my thoughts to you. You must keep remembering that your friend stands beside you." He saw her there beside him, and the greasy, roaring place became suffused with radiance. The poet was happy in his machine shop; he was still a poet there. And he fed his old zinc eater, and sang:

Away—and away!
Hi-yay!
Crash, bash, crash, bash, chang!
Wild are his eyes,
Fiercely he dies!
Hi-yay!
Crash, bash, bang! Bash, chang!
Ready to fling
Our gloves in the ring—

"I like the machine," said Bibbs. "I've made a friend of it. I serenade it and talk to it, and then it talks back to me."

"Indeed, indeed? What does it say?"

"What I want to hear."

He was unaware of a sensation that passed along the lines of workmen. Their great master had come among them, and they grinned to see him standing with Doctor Gurney behind the unconscious Bibbs. Sheridan nodded to those nearest him—he had personal acquaintance with nearly all of them—but he kept his attention upon his son. Bibbs worked steadily, never turning from his machine. Now and then he varied his musical program with remarks addressed to the zinc eater.

"Go on, you old crash-basher! Chew it up! It's good for you, if you don't try to bolt your vittles. Fletcherize, you pig! That's right—you'll never get a lump in your gizzard. Want some more? Here's a nice, shiny one."

The words were indistinguishable, but Sheridan inclined his head to Gurney's ear and shouted fiercely: "Talkin' to himself! By George!"

Gurney laughed reassuringly, and shook his head.

Bibbs returned to song.

Chang! Chang, bash, chang! It's I!
Who looks a mustang in the eye?
Fearless and bo—

His father grasped him by the arm. "Here!" he shouted. "Let me show you how to run a strip through there. The foreman says you're some better'n you used to be, but that's no way to handle— Get out the way and let me show you once."

"Better be careful," Bibbs warned him stepping to one side.

"Careful? Bah!" Sheridan seized a strip of zinc from the box. "What you talkin' to yourself about? Tryin' to make yourself think you're so abused you're goin' wrong in the head?"

"'Abused?' No!" shouted Bibbs. "I was singing—because I 'like it!' I told you I'd come back and 'like it.'"

Sheridan may not have understood. At all events, he made no reply, but began to run the strip of zinc through the machine. He did it awkwardly—and with bad results.

"Here!" he shouted. "This is the way. Watch how I do it. There's nothin' to it, if you put your mind on it." By his own showing then his mind was not upon it. He continued to talk. "All you got to look out for is to keep it pressed over to—"

"Don't run your hand up with it," Bibbs vociferated, leaning toward him.

"Run nothin'! You got to—"

"Look out!" shouted Bibbs and Gurney together, and they both sprang forward. But Sheridan's right hand had followed the strip too far, and the zinc eater had bitten off the tips of the first and second fingers. He swore vehemently, and wrung his hand, sending a shower of red drops over himself and Bibbs, but Gurney grasped his wrist, and said, sharply:

"Come out of here. Come over to the lavatory in the office. Bibbs, fetch my bag. It's in my machine, outside."

And when Bibbs brought the bag to the washroom he found the doctor still grasping Sheridan's wrist, holding the injured hand over a basin. Sheridan had lost color, and temper, too. He glared over his shoulder at his son as the latter handed the bag to Gurney.

"You go on back to your work," he said. "I've had worse snips than that from a pencil sharpener."

"Oh, no, you haven't!" said Gurney.

"I have too!" Sheridan retorted, angrily. "Bibbs, you go on back to your work. There's no reason to stand around here watchin' ole Doc Gurney tryin' to keep himself awake workin' on a scratch that only needs a little courtplaster. I slipped or it wouldn't happened. You get back on your job."

"All right," said Bibbs.

"Here!" Sheridan bellowed, as his son was passing out of the door. "You watch out when you're runnin' that machine! You hear what I say? I slipped, or I wouldn't got scratched, but you—you're liable to get your whole hand cut off! You keep your eyes open!"

"Yes, sir." And Bibbs returned to the zinc eater thoughtfully.

Half an hour later Gurney touched him on the shoulder and beckoned him outside, where conversation was possible. "I sent him home, Bibbs. He'll have to be careful of that hand. Go get your overalls off. I'll take you for a drive and leave you at home."

"Can't," said Bibbs. "Got to stick to my job till the whistle blows."

"No, you don't," the doctor returned, smotherlug a yawn. "He wants me to take you down to my office and give you an overhauling to see how much harm these four days on the machine

"You Go Back to Your Work."

have done you. I guess you folks have got that old man pretty thoroughly upset, between you, up at your house! But I don't intend to go over you. I can see with my eyes half shut—"

"Yes," Bibbs interrupted, "that's what they are."

"I say I can see you're starting out, at least, in good shape. What's made the difference?"

"I like the machine," said Bibbs.

"Well, well!" The doctor stretched himself and stamped his foot repeatedly. "Better come along and take a drive with me. You can take the time off that he allowed for the examination, and—"

Will Old Man Sheridan come to himself and appreciate Bibbs' real value now—will he take his son out of the machine shop and give him a chance to live his own life?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)